

Panel: “Explorations in American Culture”

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Title: “The Ouija Board: The Convergence of American Spiritualism and Capitalism in the Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Centuries”

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Abstract

The Ouija Board is one of the most curious, controversial, and enduring products of the late-nineteenth century. While most people are familiar with these boards, which are printed with letters and numbers and are believed, by some, to facilitate communication with the dead, many are unaware of their roots in the American spiritualist movement. Spiritualism is a belief system that holds that the dead possess both the will and ability to communicate with the living, and it gained millions of adherents in its peak during the 1840s-1920s, when most Americans had lost loved ones to war, disease, or both. Séances, typically conducted by mediums at public venues or in the parlors of wealthy families, were initially the most common way of contacting the dead. However, as Spiritualism grew in American culture, so did frustrations with the length, difficulty, and financial expense required to achieve a meaningful level of spirit communication. Everyday Americans wanted a simpler way of contacting the dead that did not require the presence of medium. In 1891, businessmen and toy-makers at the Kennard Novelty Company introduced the Ouija board to meet this demand. The device was developed and marketed as an affordable and accessible means of spirit communication, and represents the convergence of American Spiritualism and capitalism in the late nineteenth century. While acknowledging that even its inventors were never entirely sure how the device worked, this paper will attempt to shed some light on the mystery of the Ouija Board. The rise of the Ouija Board will be explored through such primary sources as original patent documents, newspaper articles, and advertisements – since the board’s development occurred nearly simultaneously with the growth of print-media, much of its story can be discovered in publications from this time period. Secondary sources, including books and commentary from historians who specialize in the fascinating area of nineteenth century spiritualism, will also be utilized.

Bibliographical Note

Important primary sources include original Ouija board patents and trademarks belonging to Elijah Bond and William Fuld, which were accessed electronically at www.patents.google.com. Additionally, photographs and biographical information about board’s creators were found on www.williamfuld.com, the official website of William Fuld and the Ouija Board. Various newspaper and magazine articles, published between the 1880’s and 1920’s and accessed at www.NEWSPAPERarchive.com, were heavily utilized. Important secondary sources include

Occult America by historian Mitch Horowitz, and “The Strange and Mysterious History of the Ouija Board,” an article by Linda McRobbie for the Smithsonian website.